

Message Text

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S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 4299

NODIS CHEROKEE

FOR SECRETARY FROM AMBASSADOR

E.O. 11652: XGDS-3

TAGS: PFOR, SY, US, IS

SUBJ: MEETING WITH ASAD -- NOVEMBER 2

REF: A. STATE 257077; B. STATE 258736

1. SUMMARY:

HAD TWO AND ONE-HALF HOUR SESSION WITH ASAD THIS AFTER-NOON. HE SHARES YOUR CONCERN TO PREVENT US-SYRIA DRIFTING APART. HE WILL NOT AUTHORIZE SHIHABI TO TRAVEL TO US BECAUSE OF POTENTIAL "NEGATIVE ASPECTS." HE HAS NOT YET FLESHED OUT HIS THINKING HOW AREA SITUATION SHOULD EVOLVE. HE VIEWS BASIC ALTERNATIVES AS EITHER (A) JOINT SYRO-PALESTINIAN NEGOTIATIONS OR (B) TURNING SECURITY COUNCIL INTO FORUM FOR PEACE CONFERENCE IN LIEU GENEVA. HE SEES NO EARLY END TO CONFLICT IN LEBANON. IT IS FOR US NOT SYRIA TO SUGGEST POSSIBLE AMERICAN ROLE IN HELPING SETTLE THAT CRISIS. ASAD CONSIDERS COMBATANTS ALREADY HAVE SUFFICIENT ARMS AND AMMO FOR INDEFINITE FUTURE. IF HE THOUGHT ARMS TRANSITING SYRIA WERE CRITICAL TO CONTINUED FIGHTING, HE WOULD STOP THEIR TRANSIT. ASAD DOES NOT RPT NOT BELIEVE BASE OF FIGHTING IN LEBANON HAS WIDENED. INDIVIDUALS FROM PLO AND SAIQA UNITS HAVE PARTICIPATED IN CONFLICT NOT RPT NOT ORGANIZATIONS PER SE. RE GOLAN BUFFER ZONE, HE SEES NO "MILITARY ACTIVITIES" OTHER THAN RECENT

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ISRAELI KILLING OF TWO CIVILIANS, FOLLOWED BY SKIRMISH

BETWEEN SYRIAN AND ISRAELI MILITARY UNITS. HE FIRMLY REJECTS ANY THOUGHT THAT SYRIA RESPONSIBLE FOR PLANNING OR PREVENTING FEDAYEEN ACTIVITIES; THIS QUESTION NOT COVERED BY DISENGAGEMENT AGREEMENT. END SUMMARY

2. PRESIDENT HEARD OUT MY PRESENTATION OF POINTS CONTAINED REFTELS WITHOUT INTERRUPTION. I TOOK PARTICULAR PAINS AVOID APPEARING ACCUSATORY RE EITHER LEBANESE ARMS FLOW OR MILITARY ACTIVITY INTO GOLAN BUFFER ZONE. HE COMMENTED THOUGHTFULLY AND LARGELY UNEMOTIONALLY, BUT FLARED IN DISCUSSING GOLAN ISSUE, DESPITE MY STRESS THAT WE WERE SIMPLY ASKING HIS VIEW OF SITUATION AND WERE PUTTING SAME QUESTION TO ISRAELIS.

3. SHIHABI'S VISIT TO WASHINGTON:

ASAD LED OFF WITH COMMENT THAT HE FULLY SHARED YOUR CONCERN IT WAS IMPORTANT TO AVOID ANY DRIFTING APART BETWEEN SYRIA AND US. HE INDICATED THAT SHIHABI HAD ALREADY DISCUSSED WITH HIM MY CONVERSATION EARLIER THIS WEEK PROPOSING HE TRAVEL TO WASHINGTON. HE COULD, HOWEVER, SEE NO UTILITY IN SHIHABI'S TRAVEL. THE GENERAL WOULD HAVE NOTHING TO SAY BEYOND WHAT ASAD HIMSELF WAS ABOUT TO SAY; AND SHIHABI COULD NOT BRING BACK FROM WASHINGTON "ANYTHING MORE THAN WHAT YOU, THE AMBASSADOR, WILL BRING." MORE IMPORTANTLY, SHIHABI'S TRAVEL COULD HAVE "SOME NEGATIVE ASPECTS." WHILE ASPECTS WOULD NOT BE AS NEGATIVE AS IF HE, ASAD, HAD MET WITH FORD, THEY WOULD STILL BE DISADVANTAGEOUS TO SYRIA. THE PRESIDENT ADDED HE WISHED TO BE CLEARLY UNDERSTOOD. HE WAS NOT IN PRINCIPLE OPPOSED TO SHIHABI'S MEETING IN WASHINGTON BUT, SINCE THE NEGATIVE ASPECTS WOULD BE INEVITABLE, HE WISHED TO SEEK "MORE FRUITFUL ACTIVITIES" THAN SENDING ANY SYRIAN REPRESENTATIVE AT THIS TIME.

4. ASAD'S IDEAS RE NEXT STEP:

PRESIDENT SAID HE AS YET HAD NO DETAILED THOUGHTS CONCERNING FUTURE DIPLOMATIC MOVEMENT. HE HAD TWO GENERAL IDEAS, BOTH WERE BASED ON ASSUMPTION THERE WAS A CHANCE
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FOR FURTHER MOVEMENT. THE FIRST WAS, AS HE HAD PUBLICLY STATED ON 6 OCTOBER, NEGOTIATIONS WHICH WOULD SIMULTANEOUSLY INVOLVE SYRIAN AND PALESTINIAN REPRESENTATIVES. HIS SECOND IDEA WAS TO PROVIDE FOR OVERALL MOVEMENT THROUGH TURNING THE UNSC INTO THE PEACE CONFERENCE FORUM. SPEAKING VERY DELIBERATELY, ASAD SAID, "I SEE THAT AS PRACTICAL." BOTH GENERAL IDEAS OBVIOUSLY NEED DETAILED PLANNING. HE WOULD WELCOME DISCUSSION WITH US ABOUT HOW TO TRANSLATE

HIS IDEAS INTO PRACTICAL FORM.

5. I ASKED IF MY UNDERSTANDING OF HIS SECOND PROPOSITION WERE CORRECT: DID HE MEAN THE UNSC WOULD REPLACE THE GENEVA CONFERENCE AS THE SOLE FORUM? HE SAID, "YES, IN SUCH CASE GENEVA WOULD BE CONSIDERED DEAD." DID PRESIDENT MEAN THAT HE WOULD CONSIDER GENEVA DEAD ONLY IF UNSC CONVENES AS CONFERENCE FORUM? ASAD REPLIED HE WAS NOT DISCUSSING GENEVA CONFERENCE, "ALTHOUGH IT HAS ALREADY DIED AS A DIRECT RESULT OF THOSE SECRET ANNEXES." ASAD SAID HE BELIEVED THAT THROUGH THE SINAI ACCORD'S SECRET ANNEXES THE US HAD NOW COMMITTED ITSELF FULLY TO THE ISRAELI SIDE. BY AGREEING WE WOULD JOINTLY DEFINE WITH ISRAEL "FUTURE WORK PROCEDURES AT GENEVA" THE US HAD DISQUALIFIED ITSELF AS GENEVA CO-CHAIRMAN. HOWEVER, HE HASTILY ADDED, "I DO NOT INTEND TODAY TO DISCUSS THE SECRET ANNEXES." (HE LATER ACKNOWLEDGED HIS KNOWLEDGE OF THE ANNEXES WAS ONLY FROM PRESS COMMENTARIES.)

6. LEBANON:

RECALLING YOUR EARLIER MESSAGE WHICH SOUGHT HIS VIEWS ON US ROLE IN LEBANON, ASAD SAID HE WAS UNABLE TO MAKE ANY SUGGESTION. HE DID NOT ACCURATELY KNOW WHAT US POSSIBILITIES ARE TO ACT IN THE LEBANESE CRISIS. ONLY THE US KNOWS ITS OWN POSSIBILITIES. HE WOULD BE PLEASED TO DISCUSS FULLY ANY SUGGESTIONS FOR US ROLE WHICH YOU MAY HAVE. RE WHAT GOVERNMENTS OUTSIDE LEBANON MIGHT DO TO CUT DOWN THE FLOW OF WEAPONS AND AMMO TO THE COMBATANT FACTIONS, ASAD OBSERVED, "THE FACTIONS HAVE ENOUGH ARMS AND AMMUNITION TO CONTINUE FIGHTING FOR MANY MORE MONTHS." AS FAR AS HE COULD TELL THEY NOW HAD NO NEED FOR SUPPLIES FROM OUTSIDE OF LEBANON. THEREFORE, A SUGGESTION TO CUT DOWN THE FLOW DID NOT OFFER MUCH
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PROSPECT OF DAMPENING THE FIGHTING. WERE LEBANESE COMBATANTS, HE CONTINUED, SHORT OF WEAPONS AND IN NEED OF ARMS TRANSITING SYRIA TO CONTINUE FIGHTING, "WE WOULD CERTAINLY STOP THE ARMS TRANSIT. UNFORTUNATELY, THE FACTS OF THE LEBANESE PROBLEM ARE DIFFERENT." PRESIDENT NOTED PARENTHETICALLY THAT SYRIA SOMETIMES HEARD OF ARMS COMING TO CERTAIN PARTIES IN LEBANON BY OCEAN. PERHAPS THIS WAS TRUE, HE COULD NOT BE SURE.

7. SYRIA REMAINS, ASAD SAID, IN DAILY CONTACT WITH LEBANESE LEADERS AND WILL CONTINUE TO URGE CESSATION OF FIGHTING. PRESIDENT THEN ASKED, "BUT DOES THE US REALLY HAVE NO SUGGESTIONS OF ITS OWN ABOUT WHAT IT MIGHT DO?" I REPLIED HE KNEW OUR PUBLIC POSITION SUPPORTING THE INDEPENDENCE AND TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY OF LEBANON. THE PRESIDENT WAS

SURELY FAMILIAR ALSO WITH RUMORS OF USG EFFORTS TO MEDDLE IN LEBANESE POLITICS, INCLUDING CIA ACTIONS DESIGNED TO ADVANCE THE FORTUNES OF OUR ALLEGED FRIENDS. HE KNEW THROUGH YOUR MESSAGE THAT WE WERE PRIVATELY MAKING CLEAR WE SPONSORED NO LEBANESE FACTION AS AN INSTRUMENT OF US POLICY. WE WERE TRYING TO STRIP THE US IMAGE IN LEBANON OF THE MYTHS WHICH ENCRUSTED IT. SAID I WOULD BRING BACK TO HIM ANY SPECIAL THOUGHTS YOU MAY EXPRESS ABOUT LEBANON DURING MY WASHINGTON CONSULTATIONS.

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8. ASAD REVEALED THAT IN NOVEMBER 1 TELEPHONE CONVERSATION PRIMIN KARAME HAD ASSURED SYRIA THAT BEIRUT SITUATION WAS IMPROVING. "HOWEVER, IT SEEMS THAT SITUATION CONTINUALLY QUIETENS DOWN THEN REHEATS." ASAD OBSERVED, "IF FRANGIEH HAD TELEPHONED AND WAS WILLING TO ASK FOR SYRIAN FORCES, WE WOULD HAVE SENT THEM TO QUIETEN THE SITUATION." SAID I ASSUMED THAT WAS THE LAST TELEPHONE CALL ASAD HOPED TO RECEIVE. HE SMILED BUT WENT ON IN APPARENTLY SERIOUS VEIN THAT, "IF FRANGIEH ASKED FOR THEM, THEY WOULD BE AT HIS DISPOSAL AND WOULD ACT UNDER HIS ORDERS AS PRESIDENT OF AN INDEPENDENT STATE." ASAD REITERATED SYRIA HAS NO INTEREST IN LEBANON OTHER THAN TO HELP SECURE PEACE; ALL OTHER PARTIES WHICH COULD PLAY A ROLE TO QUIETEN THE SITUATION SHOULD DO SO. HE THEN ASKED WHAT REACTION I HAD HAD TO SHIHABI'S IDEA THAT WE SHOULD STATE WE DID NOT SUPPORT THE HARDLINE CHRISTIAN ELEMENTS (DAMASCUS 4264). SAID I HAD RELAYED THIS IDEA TO WASHINGTON BUT HAD NO ANSWER. OBSERVED IT IS SOMETIMES BETTER TO MAKE SUCH STATEMENTS PRIVATELY; WE KNEW OUR POSITION ON THIS QUESTION WAS ALREADY CIRCULATING

IN BEIRUT. ASAD SAID HE DID NOT BELIEVE THAT RECENT REPORTS OF PLO AND SAIQA PARTICIPATION IN THE FIGHTING REPRESENTED A WIDENING OF THE BASE. SUCH PARTICIPATION AS HAD OCCURRED IN HIS OPINION HAD BEEN BY INDIVIDUALS. FIGHTING TEAMS WERE NOW HIGHLY MOBILE ON BOTH SIDES OF THE LINES; THE SAME ELEMENTS WERE APPEARING IN THE VARIOUS QUARTERS AFFECTED. OF COURSE, THE PALESTINIAN ORGANIZATIONS WOULD RESPOND AS GROUPS, AND HAVE ALREADY DONE SO, IN THOSE INSTANCES WHEN REFUGEE CAMPS THEMSELVES WERE ATTACKED.

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9. PRESIDENT THEN ADDRESSED OTHER SUBJECTS BUT LEBANON WAS STILL ON HIS MIND. AS I WAS TAKING LEAVE AT VERY END OF OUR MEETING, HE SUDDENLY ASKED, "ARE YOU AFRAID LEBANON WILL GO COMMUNIST?" I SAID THAT WAS NOT OUR CONCERN; RATHER WE WORRIED BECAUSE THE CONTINUED CRISIS WAS RAISING AREA TENSIONS AND THEREBY BLOCKING, OR AT LEAST SLOWING DOWN, ATTEMPTS TO DEAL WITH THE CENTRAL ARAB-ISRAELI ISSUES. HE NODDED HIS UNDERSTANDING.

10. MILITARY ACTIVITIES ON GOLAN:

ASAD STRESSED THAT THE ONLY "MILITARY ACTIVITY" IN THE BUFFER ZONE HAD BEEN THE ISRAELI KILLING OF TWO SYRIAN SHEPHERDS AND THE SUBSEQUENT SKIRMISH BETWEEN A SYRIAN MILITARY UNIT AND ISRAELI PATROL. ISRAEL HAD BROKEN THE DISENGAGEMENT AGREEMENT BY KILLING THE CIVILIANS. ASAD NOTED THAT PERHAPS THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT WANTED TO RAISE THE LEVEL OF TENSION ON THE CEASEFIRE LINES. ON OTHER HAND, PERHAPS IT WAS ONLY CERTAIN ISRAELI OFFICERS OR SOLDIERS REPRESENTING PARTICULAR POLITICAL FACTIONS IN ISRAEL WHICH HAVE SUCH AN INTEREST. SHIHABI HAD TOLD HIM OF OUR CONCERN ABOUT LAST WEEK'S FEDAYEEN INCIDENT. THE PRESIDENT SAID WE MUST UNDERSTAND TWO THINGS; FIRST, THIS INCIDENT HAD NOT TAKEN PLACE IN THE DISENGAGEMENT ZONE. SECOND, IT HAD NO RELATION TO THE DISENGAGEMENT AGREEMENT. "THE FEDAYEEN ARE AN INDEPENDENT AUTHORITY. WE NEVER COMMITTED OURSELVES BEFORE THE DISENGAGEMENT AGREEMENT, NOR THROUGH IT NOR AFTER IT, NOR WILL WE EVER COMMIT OURSELVES TO PREVENT FEDAYEEN ACTIVITIES. THEY ARE FREE TO ACT AS THEY DECIDE." THE FEDAYEEN SERVE THEIR OWN INDEPENDENT AUTHORITIES AND SYRIA CANNOT NEGOTIATE ON THEIR BEHALF ANY MORE THAN IT CAN ON THE BEHALF OF THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE. SYRIA DOES NOT PLAN FEDAYEEN ACTIVITIES IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES NOR IS IT SYRIA'S RESPONSIBILITY TO PREVENT THE FEDAYEEN FROM CARRYING OUT THEIR MISSIONS.

11. SENSING HIS TEMPERATURE WAS RISING OVER THIS ISSUE, I SAID I HOPED THE PRESIDENT REALIZED I HAD NOT COME

TO THE GENERAL AND HIMSELF EITHER TO JUDGE OR TO ACCUSE
SYRIA ABOUT FEDAYEEN ACTIONS. I CAME BECAUSE IT WAS A
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TIME OF TENSION AND I CAME UNDER INSTRUCTIONS TO PUT THE
STORY, AS WE HAD RECEIVED IT, BEFORE SYRIA. IT WAS NOT
FOR US TO DECIDE ABOUT THE MERITS OF ANY SUCH STORY. OUR
AIM WAS TO AVOID FURTHER ESCALATION IN THE SITUATION. ASAD
IMMEDIATELY REPLIED HE UNDERSTOOD COMPLETELY AND DID NOT
FURTHER PURSUE HIS ARGUMENTS.

12. SADAT'S VISIT TO US:

ASAD ASKED HOW MANY MORE DAYS SADAT WOULD REMAIN IN
US. SAID I BELIEVED HIS LAST FORMAL ENGAGEMENT WAS NEXT
WEDNESDAY AND ASKED IF THE PRESIDENT HAD FORMED ANY
IMPRESSIONS OF THE VISIT. ASAD REPLIED POKER FACED HE
ACTUALLY HAD HEARD VERY LITTLE ABOUT THE VISIT. I SAID HE MUST
HAVE HEARD AT LEAST A SUMMARY OF SADAT'S UN SPEECH. "YES,"
HE REPLIED, "THAT WAS WHEN HE CALLED FOR THE PLO TO PARTICIPATE
IN GENEVA CONFERENCE." PRESIDENT CLEARLY DID NOT WISH TO
COMMENT FURTHER. I TOOK OPENING TO REMIND HIM OF VALUE WE
SAW IN SINAI ACCORD; IT WAS FIRST ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL ACHIEVED
THROUGH NEGOTIATIONS AND UNDER CONDITIONS OF PEACE.
ISRAELI PUBLIC OPINION, WHICH INITIALLY HAD BEEN HIGHLY
SUSPICIOUS, WAS ALREADY BECOMING MORE FAVORABLE TO THE
ACCORD. THAT REASSESSMENT WAS AN ENCOURAGING SIGN THAT THE
PROCESS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CHANGE WITHIN ISRAEL ABOUT THE
VALUE AND POSSIBILITIES OF DEALING WITH ARABS, A PROCESS
YOU HAD SO OFTEN DISCUSSED WITH THE PRESIDENT, WAS UNDERWAY.

13. COMMENT:

PRESIDENT WAS BLUNT AND FRANK THROUGHOUT THE MEETING.
THERE WERE TOUCHES OF SARCASM AS WHEN HE VOICED THE
KORAN'S RITUAL BLESSING OVER THE DEAD IN DISCUSSING
THE GENEVA CONFERENCE. HOWEVER, HE WAS PERSONALLY FRIENDLY
THROUGHOUT AND WARMLY RECIPROCATED YOUR PERSONAL REGARDS.
UNLESS INSTRUCTED TO CONTRARY, I PLAN DEPART FOR WASHINGTON
WEDNESDAY, OVERNIGHT IN LONDON, ARRIVING THURSDAY NOVEMBER 6.
MURPHY

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